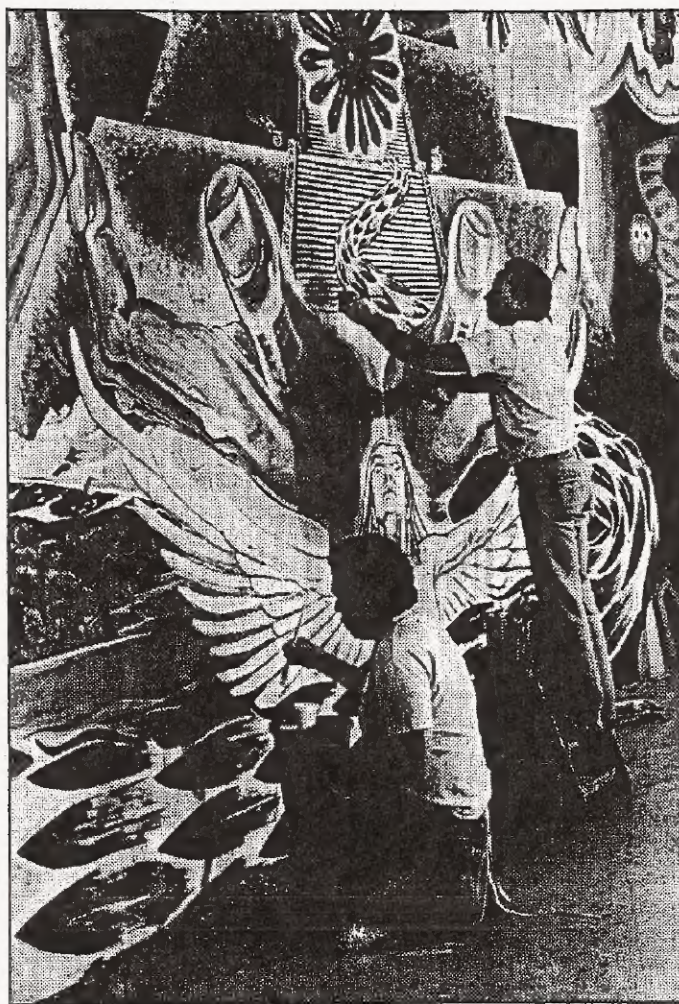


San Diego County

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BOB GRIESELL / Los Angeles Times

Artists Guillermo Aranda, right, and Victor Ochoa work on the mural at the Centro Cultural de la Raza, a landmark in Balboa Park.

Mural Tells Story of Artist and a People

By MATT DAMSKER,
San Diego County Arts Writer

The 774-square-foot Chicano mural on the inner wall of Balboa Park's Centro Cultural de la Raza is called "La Dualidad"—in English, "The Duality"—and it's aptly named. For all its mythic depictions of feathered serpents, jaguar and deer, its symbols of good and evil and its historic cultural references, it also helps tell the story of its creator, artist Guillermo Aranda.

Aranda, 39, is a National City native who began the work, which is the oldest permanently exhibited Chicano mural in San Diego, 13 years ago. Finally, on Thursday afternoon, he and his assistants completed it, with some final acrylic painting and the addition of a ceramic head of the Toltec deity Quetzalcoatl. Ranging hugely from left to right, the mural's action and symbolism moves from the dark, destructive ages of Native American culture to an idealized harmony of earth and spirit. The moods correspond to Aranda's developing sense of cultural identity.

"When I started this," said Aranda, a trim, thoughtful man, "I began on the left side, and that's a reflection of a lot of the frustrations I was feeling—as a Mexican-American, as a Native American, and in relation to the native peoples' situations of the day.

"The center area I began about
Please see MURAL, Page 2

FRIDAY JAN. 6, 1984

Pg 2

MURAL: Artist

Continued from Page 1

five years ago, and I suppose my attitudes were changing. This final section on the right deals with spirituality rather than the physical world. Maybe it shows that Native Americans like myself are beginning to learn to cope with the world as it is."

Indeed, the febrile depictions of the mural's left side are startling and disturbing. There's a fiery image of Cuahutemoc, the last emperor of the Aztecs, being tortured by Cortez at the beginning of Mexico's colonial era. Fierce images of a jaguar continue the violent, angry themes. And then there's a dark, Darth Vader-like presence—"I call him Mechanized Man," said Aranda—symbolizing industrial oppression.

Ultimately, there's a huge reddened fist, fashioned from Styrofoam, that juts out from the wall. It stems from a depiction of a wrist being injected by a hypodermic syringe in the shape of a crucifix—a terrible symbol of Christianity as an early opiate and oppressor of the Mexican people. Moving to the right, with a ghostlike image of Emiliano Zapata symbolizing revolution and freedom, the mural lightens with gentler imagery—the deer, the hummingbird, eternal woman, a dawning sense of hope.

Aranda, who served in Vietnam as an Air Force mechanic, might have completed the mural, which he began sketching in 1970 as a student at San Diego State University, long ago. But some self-imposed detours led him afield.

Not long after painting the mural's left section, he moved with his wife and children to Redwind, a cultural community for Indians in San Luis Obispo County. There, he learned silversmithing, pottery-making and ranching.

After eight years, and amid the trauma caused when some of Redwind's water supply was found to be contaminated by a uranium-drilling project, Aranda left to seek more gainful work in San Luis Obispo. He and

his family now reside in Watsonville, where "I'm painting houses and hanging wallpaper." But since leaving Redwind he has found the time and means to return here to his mural. Nearly all of the time and materials for the mural were donated.

"It's hard for me to answer exactly why the changes in me and the mural," he reflected. "But I talk about my frustrations and maybe I wanted to get away from them. And maybe as a Native American I wanted to learn more about my roots, which is what took me to Redwind."

Aranda is certainly a key figure in San Diego's Chicano art community. He was the first director of the Centro Cultural and an original member of its founding organization, the Toltecas en Aztlan. Aranda helped coordinate the 1973 community mural project at Chicano Park, now a designated historical site.

Among Aranda's assistants in Thursday's completion of "La Dualidad" was Victor Ochoa, a former Centro Cultural director and now the California Arts Council's community mural artist-in-residence.

"This mural has always been very important to us," Ochoa said. "It marks the spirit of the Chicano art movement in the '60s and '70s, which carried the torch as far as the mural painting of the last 20 years. The tradition extends from (primitive) rock painting to the murals of the '30s, the WPA era, the '40s, right up to the present. It's a way for us to continuously reflect the problems, the attitudes we see in the Chicano community. This being the oldest mural in San Diego has influenced thousands of our people."

"It also has a power of expression that has a freedom about it. One of the reasons I'm dedicated to mural painting is I know that some (show-business) executive isn't gonna say to me, Hey, your art can't be this harsh or say these things. But this is our freedom of expression. It's like a book to educate our community."

Beyond its Chicano emphasis, however, "La Dualidad" suggests a very broad unity of Indian cultures.

"An important impulse represented here is the strong influence of native people in this entire part of the world," Centro Cultural spokesman David Avalos said of the mural.